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The Art of Adjustment

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist's Statement: The Art of Adjustment

My artwork is fortified by three essential elements, vibrant color, luminous light, and repeated patterns found in nature. These elements unify my oil paintings and computer generated artwork and form a substructure that serves to magnify the unique concord found in nature.

The Art of Adjustment

Introduction

My interest in art started in elementary school, but did not fully develop until I relocated to Indonesia where I started an advertising agency. I often used my paintings for corporate publications when it was difficult to find a photographer. Later, I continued painting when I moved back to the United States and took classes at the Chicago Art Institute. I had my first introduction to the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) off-campus program when I became an employee of Fairfax County Schools. The VCU classes were held in the friendly atmosphere of local classrooms and were quite relaxed. Classes that I had taken prior to this program taught specific techniques and styles, but this program was focused on encouraging students to develop their own style.

The two focus areas that I chose, oil painting and digital technology, gave me a sense of opposite methods of working. Oil painting proved to be very tactile, slow, and purposeful while the computer art seemed very spontaneous. My original goal for the program was to discover a method to paint quickly what was in my mind instead of painting only what I saw with my eyes, in other words, to paint the invisible. I found that Leonardo Da Vinci (1475-1564) had voiced his opinion that the painter had to represent two main things, man and “the motions of man’s mind.”¹ Like Da Vinci, this idea was important to me and I wanted to find a faster way to record my ideas and thoughts. I

¹ John Julius Norwich. *The Great Artists of the World* (London, England: Marshall Cavendish Press, 1990), p.31.

started my journey to speed up my oil painting process so that I could reach my goal. I was unaware of the journey that lay ahead of me.

Oil Painting: Small Adjustments to the Light

While taking landscape painting classes in the summer, I would often drive to the quiet Shenandoah Mountains armed with my oil paints and brushes. I worked alone and with fervor as I overlooked the rich green valleys below. If I did not paint quickly, the light would alter the warm yellows to coral pinks, only to be changed again when an invading cloud cast a blue spell upon the scene. It caused a more hurried brushstroke and reminded me of the reason that the French Impressionists first arrived at their own style. They too were adjusting to the changing time and light.

A distinctive style soon emerged, one in which I acknowledge the strong influence of the Impressionists. I applied a variety of colors using small strokes in order to simulate the play of light on objects. *Golden Stepping Stones* (Appendix, 1) illustrates this simulation. My desire was to give my landscapes spontaneity and energy. Impressionist Claude Monet (1840-1926) had a similar aim of catching the passing impressions of light and atmosphere. The Impressionists found that the greatest drawback to their approach to painting was that nature changed so quickly that it was difficult to paint fast enough.

With regard to this painting problem, I have found Monet's statements to be true:

Everyday I discover more and more beautiful things; it's enough to drive one man mad; I have such a desire to do everything, my head is bursting with it!...I am fairly well satisfied with my stay here although my sketches are far from what I should like; it is indeed frightfully difficult to make a thing complete in all aspects...Well, my good

friend, I intend to struggle, scrape off, begin again, because one can produce what one sees and what one understands...It is on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds it.²

The landscape classes forced me to paint more quickly and with more control since I had limited time in my classes. The earlier landscapes of wave-washed rocks in the blistering sun, as in *Built upon a Rock* (Appendix, 2), were painted with a palette knife in complementary colors to increase the energy in the paintings. The far reaching vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains helped me to see the depth and spatial planes more easily and my paintings reflected this new understanding, as seen in *Purple Mountain* (Appendix, 3). My fascination with capturing the movement of water later developed in the painting classes, as in *Red Reflection* (Appendix, 4). Working outside proved to be an excellent learning experience. It allowed me to focus on what I found to be important, such as the energy of the landscape, and the ability to adjust my method of painting to the atmospheric changes. After these paintings, four important elements emerged from my artwork: a sense of light, spatial planes, heightened rhythm, and more purposeful color.

Mixed Media: Quantum Adjustments

The solitude of the landscapes that I had painted outside were also available in a place that I least expected it – my computer. While learning to use the program Photoshop, I discovered many methods that catapulted me towards my goal of painting my thoughts more quickly. The speed with which I could work on the computer matched the speed of my own thinking. I also noticed that the natural light outside was more of a

² Dianne Kelder. *The Great Book of French Impressionism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), p. 155.

directional and reflected light, yet the artificial light from the computer seemed to provide an inner glow.

During this period of study, I was also working at The Washington National Cathedral where I took many digital pictures of statues and stained glass windows. I then downloaded them to my computer so that I could manipulate the images. I placed combinations of things together, as in *The Shepherd* (Appendix, 5). The image of the statue, *Good Shepherd*, was extracted out of its surroundings and later pasted on top of a digital image of a sky. Then, with the Photoshop airbrush tool, I diffused light on the lamb. My manipulated image brightened this formerly dark statue and placed it in a different context. My goal was to convey the reverence that I felt while in the Cathedral. *Creator's Light* (Appendix, 6) was painted using the various brush and smudge tools for the background flecks of light and the imagery was layered. In *Grasping Truth* (Appendix, 7), the powerful hand seen in a full figure statue located on the south end of the Cathedral inspired me to focus on only the outreached hand and then to interject a glowing light within the hand symbolizing truth. I have found that digital technology has allowed me to paint my thoughts in pixels.

Again using the digital images, I created a series of nine works called *Prayer Pods*. One of the images in the series, *Water Cathedrals* (Appendix, 8), was created by combining deepwater photographs with the cathedral nave to give a sense of fluidity and translucence similar to Monet's, *Rouen Cathedral Full Sunlight* (1894). *Prayer Pods* are images of the cathedral on glass using transfer techniques. I inserted these pictures in small shadow boxes. These encased pictures on glass allowed the natural light to come

through the back of the boxes giving them an illuminated appearance. I chose to use gold shadow boxes to reveal the treasured nature of the Scriptures. The jewel tone colors I used in the imagery were chosen to echo the stained glass windows in the Cathedral and appropriate scriptural text was embedded into the imagery.

Harold Edgerton (1903-1990), the developer of stroboscopy, a photographic method using electronic flashes of light to reveal fast movement to the naked eye, had spent his entire career trying to make the invisible, visible. I found that layering sequential imagery helped me to convey a more unified transparent light and fluid imagery similar to his photographs. I never could have achieved this with the use of opaque paints. I felt that layering colors, text, drawings, and digital photography clearly conveyed my thought better and faster than other methods.

Adjusting to the Dark

In 2005, during the course of my study, my husband suddenly passed away causing me to fall into an emotional tailspin. His death made me wonder about many things such as the afterlife and the nature of heaven. I asked myself many questions about what they must be like. This thinking about earthly and heavenly spaces sent me on a quest that I had not anticipated. My questions led me to the subject of light, not reflected light as seen on the earth, but luminous light which one sees when viewing the stars.

The light coming from stars and the planets seemed to be symbolically magnetic, as though the more they shone, the more attracting their force was on my thought. Searching for secrets about space, these celestial landscapes beckoned me to consider the

images and vistas I might observe from space. I decided to use these spacescapes as subjects for my work. At this point, I had no idea how to draw or paint space. However, after some investigation into Photoshop methods, I started my journey.

I first decided to pull strands of Christmas lights across my scanner. I marveled that these points of light when printed visually mimicked the planets and stars. The open scanner bed created dark space that I used for the background of the pieces. To these spacescapes, I added photographs and drawings of dancers to convey an earthly rhythm in the pieces. *Two Clear Planets* (Appendix, 9) was accomplished by the layering and manipulation of my drawings. Later, I created *Rejoice* (Appendix, 10) which showed a dancer as a metaphorical note on a spatial musical scale reflecting a human spirit. It seemed that the layering of the imagery and color was starting to replicate my own thought patterns.

Shaun McNiff, in his book *Art Heals*, made me realize that these floating images on dark backgrounds were not unique to my own thought but were found in others' imaginations as well,

Art history can be re-imagined as an archetypal and protean process rather than as a tidy chain of individual human inventions and direct influences. Images such as labyrinths, flight, dark openings, mystical spaces, crowded patterns and symmetries, and embracing figures are eternally recurring and constantly rediscovered through an artists' journey into expression where images present themselves and pass into individualized forms as a result of the meeting.³

³ Shaun McNiff. *Art Heals* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004), p. 215.

Illumining the Universe (Appendix, 11) was created by scanning the bottom of drinking glasses on the scanner, and using a flashlight to illuminate the glass circles. The light for the stars was imported from various sources and also drawn with Photoshop brush tools. It was in this piece that I realized that I needed to incorporate an indication of soft line work, so I explored methods for adding clear or translucent lines. I found that glass etching was what I needed to complete the project, so I purchased a glass etching system. It evolved into a method for adding lined images in the etched glass as seen in *Planetary Dance* (Appendix, 12). I placed the etched glass panels on top of the completed layers of dark sky and planets; this last step finished the pieces giving them even more luminosity and line.

The Final Adjustment

A benefit of the MIS program is that it allowed me time to develop methods and a style. The flexibility of classes and scheduling also gave me an opportunity to work full time and exhibit my artwork in a local gallery.

I found that exploring opposing methods of expression challenged my thinking with regards to the processes and rewarded me with more expedient and effective methods for working on my art. Digitizing my drawings and paintings and then integrating them into more inventive scenes made me realize that I had no limitations of expression, except the ones I might place on myself. My experience in making digital pictures has been that the process encourages me to complement what I have done on the computer with work from my studio using painting materials. This reciprocal relationship,

wherein the different media stimulate one another, creates a cross-pollination that encourages new ideas. This was also emphasized by Shaun McNiff when he stated that, “The creative imagination is propelled by the urge to cross over from one object to the contemplation of another.”⁴

In the latter part of 2005, I utilized what I had discovered from my use of glass, digital imagery, and concepts about space, and created *Spaceweights* (Appendix, 13). These are retail products that I have made for my new business. I have found that many people experience the same sense of awe about the earth and universe as I do. I wanted to make art oriented to this space imagery for a wider audience. So, with my new found knowledge of techniques and processes in conjunction with my interest in space, I seem to have tapped into unlimited inspiration. It staggers my imagination to discover that earthly or heavenly landscapes are as infinite as ideas themselves. Rendering landscapes or spacescapes has increased my interest in finding out more about the harmony and design of our universe. The height, depth, and breadth of our own thought is as infinite as the stars.

⁴ Shaun McNiff. *Art Heals* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004), p. 228

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *Golden Stepping Stones*, oil on canvas, 16"x20", 2004.
- Figure 2. *Built upon a Rock*, oil on canvas, 24" x 16", 2004.
- Figure 3. *Purple Mountain*, oil on canvas, 24" x 16", 2004.
- Figure 4. *Red Reflection*, oil on canvas, 20"x 16", 2004.
- Figure 5. *The Shepherd*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2004.
- Figure 6. *Creator's Light*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.
- Figure 7. *Grasping Truth*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.
- Figure 8. *Water Cathedrals*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.
- Figure 9. *Two Clear Planets*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.
- Figure 10. *Rejoice*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.
- Figure 11. *Illumining the Universe*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.
- Figure 12. *Planetary Dance*, mixed media, 36" x 24", 2005.
- Figure 13. *Spaceweights*, mixed media in crystal, 3" x 3"x 3", 2005.



Figure 1. *Golden Stepping Stones*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20", 2004.



Figure 2. *Built upon a Rock*, oil on canvas, 24" x 16", 2004.

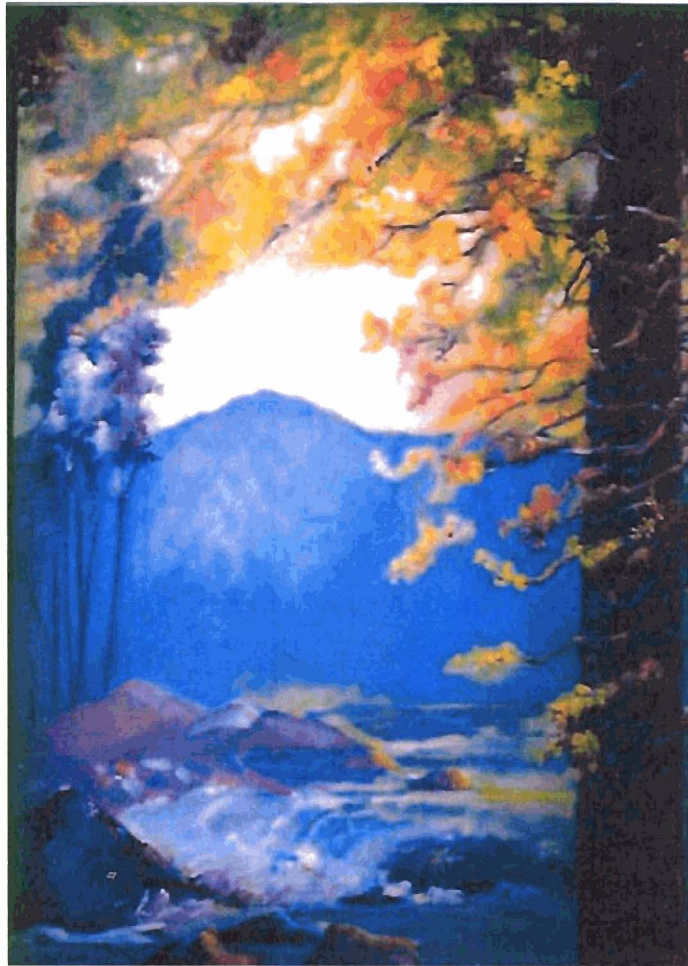


Figure 3. *Purple Mountain*, oil on canvas, 24" x 16", 2004.



Figure 4. *Red Reflection*, oil on canvas, 20" x 16", 2004.



Figure 5. *The Shepherd*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2004.



Figure 6. *Creator's Light*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.



Figure 7. *Grasping Truth*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.

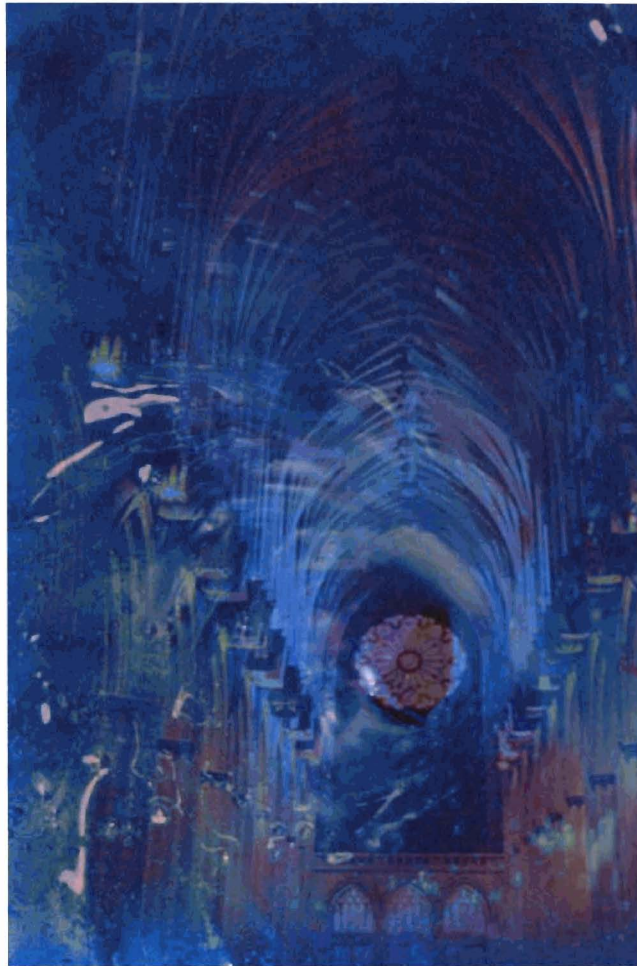


Figure 8. *Water Cathedrals*, mixed media, 12" x 9", 2004.



Figure 9. *Two Clear Planets*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.

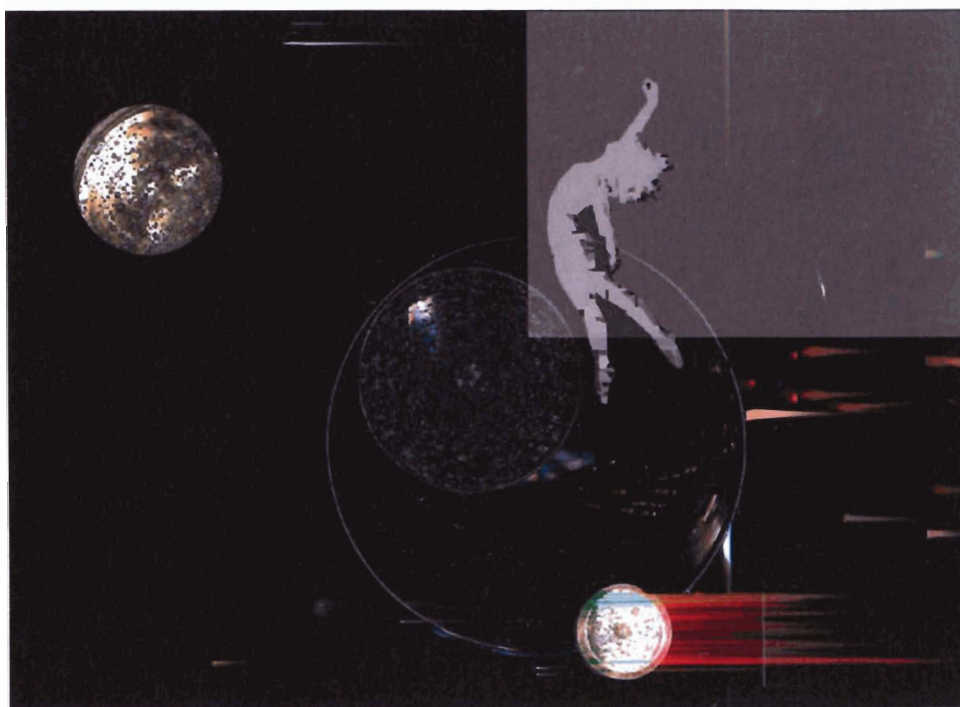


Figure 10. *Rejoice*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.



Figure 11. *Illuminating the Universe*, mixed media, 9" x 12", 2005.

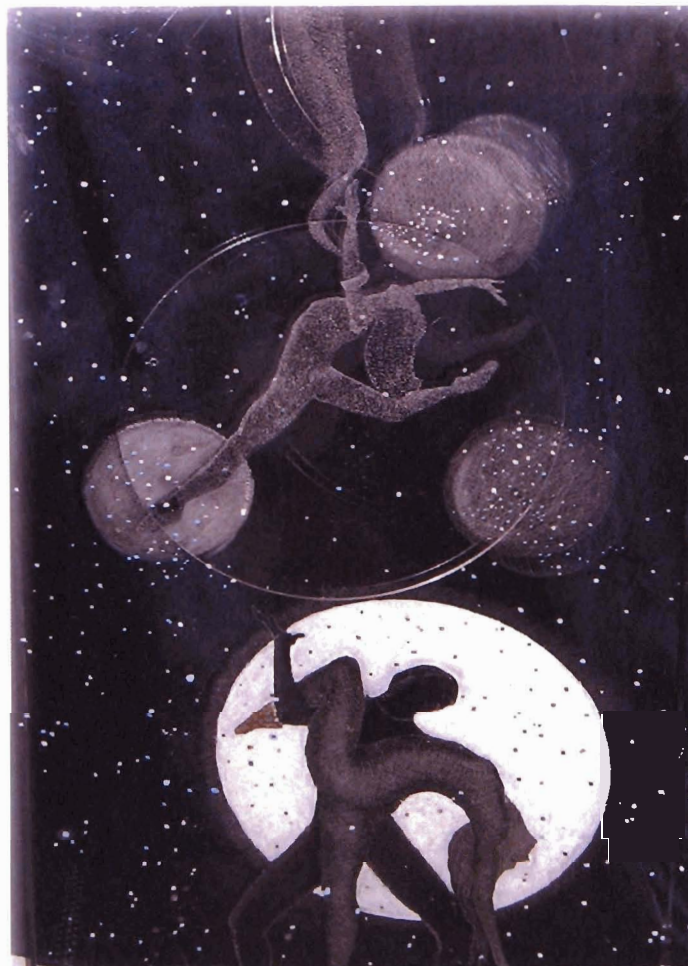


Figure 12. *Planetary Dance*, mixed media, 36" x 24", 2005.



Figure 13. *Spaceweights*, mixed media in crystal, 3" x 3"x 3", 2005.

Kathryn F. Matthews**Education:**

2006	Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia
1972	Bachelor of Fine Arts Southern Methodist University Dallas, Texas

Teaching Experience:

1998-2005	Fairfax County Public Schools Springfield, Virginia Substitute Teacher and Instructional Assistant
2003-2005	Washington National Cathedral Family Program Washington, DC Art Teacher
1996-2004	Da Vinci Kids Springfield, Virginia Founder and Art Teacher
1992-1997	Fairfax Academy of Music and Art Fairfax, Virginia Art Teacher

Related Experience:

2005-present	Glass Atlas, LLC Co-Founder Springfield, Virginia
1987-1998	Ambassador Relocations, Inc. Co-Founder Dulles, Virginia

Professional Organizations and Memberships:

2003	Washington National Cathedral Washington, DC
1998	Torpedo Factory Artists League Alexandria, Virginia
1996	Springfield Art League Springfield, Virginia
1996	Fairfax Chamber of Commerce Fairfax, Virginia
1995	Children's Book Guild (Illustration) Los Angeles, California
1990	National Art Education Association Reston, Virginia

Solo Exhibitions:

2005	Scapes , Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Verizon Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College Annandale, Virginia
2001	The Quiet Place , Wachovia Bank Burke, Virginia

Group Exhibitions:

2005	Lorton Workhouse Palette Auction , Lorton Prison Fairfax, Virginia
2004	Holiday Group Show , Fairfax Government Center Fairfax, Virginia
2003	Springfield Art Guild Group Show , Byrd Library Springfield, Virginia
2002	Springfield Art Guild Group Show , Pohick Library Springfield, Virginia
2000	Traveling , Seattle Convention Center Household Goods Forwarders Convention Seattle, Washington

Gallery Representation:

1997-2000	The Artist's Undertaking 309 Mill, Street, Occoquan, Virginia
1987-1990	The Loft Gallery 312 Mill Street, Occoquan, Virginia